

'IMITATE HIM IF YOU DARE': RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE EPITAPHS OF SWIFT AND YEATS

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The notoriously cryptic epitaph which William Butler Yeats composed to be carved on his own gravestone in Drumcliff Churchyard near Sligo, Ireland, reads as follows:

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!¹

Of the few authorities who have commented on Yeats's epitaph at all, a significant number agree that meaningful relationships and associations exist between it and the tombstone inscription of Jonathan Swift. Jon Stallworthy feels that 'it is impossible to say' whether Swift's epitaph was an 'influence . . . conscious or unconscious' upon Yeats's.² Other scholars and critics, however, have been less uncertain. Thomas Henn, Hugh Kenner, Edward Callan, Maurice Johnson (a Swift scholar), and Donald Torchiana all suggest significant connections, as will come to light in subsequent discussion. But as in most treatments of any aspect of Yeats's epitaph, the remarks are brief and fragmentary, only touching the outer fringes of an extremely complex set of interrelationships between the gravestone inscriptions of the two famous Anglo-Irish authors.

Yeats re-discovered Swift in late life at a time when his imagination had fastened upon the notion of a great age of Irish writers, philosophers, and statesmen in the eighteenth century. He had to bend things only a little to include Swift in this pantheon, for Swift was born in Ireland (though of English parents), was raised and educated in Ireland, returned to Ireland from England to become Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, died in Ireland, and was buried — in the cathedral where he had been dean — beneath the controversial epitaph which he authored for himself. The late 1920s and early 1930s were the years in which Yeats became obsessed with the idea of a Georgian Ireland that represented in his thought the apex of a belated Renaissance on that island. His letters and essays of the '20s and '30s are filled with references to Berkeley, Burke, and Swift, especially the latter, and in 1930 he wrote a strangely deceptive play about the tormented ghost of Swift interrupting a séance to expostulate with the equally unhappy spirit of Vanessa. The most frequently quoted of such numerous references to Swift is from Yeats's introduction to that play: 'Swift haunts me; he is always just round the next corner.'³

Studies Summer/Autumn 1981

Any number of parallels or similarities — real or imagined — between Swift and himself help to explain Yeats's late-life fascination with the Dean. For example, the two writers held in common what Yeats called Irish hatred for abstraction. Furthermore, in one way or another and to one degree or another, both men were involved with politics, in their lives as well as in their writings. Of obvious importance to the relationship between their epitaphs was their shared belief in a life of the spirit after death and in immortality of the human soul, even though one held such beliefs within the framework of orthodox Christianity while the other did not. Strong emotion, rage, or frenzy, strangely blended with a fierce personal integrity — all these were qualities in Swift which Yeats openly admired in his own impassioned old age. Related to these qualities are some similarities between the poetic style and content of later Yeats and that of his eighteenth-century predecessor. By all odds, however, the two chief areas of similarity in thought and feeling — most especially as regards associations between the epitaphs — are disdain for the great middle-class masses of humanity ('the common run of men') and agreement about the cyclical or epochal nature of history. The first of these involved a kind of aristocratic intellectualism or intellectual aristocracy — what some of Yeats's detractors would term snobbery but what Yeats himself labelled hatred of Whiggery. The other had to do with Yeats's conviction that Swift, like himself, sensed the consequences of 'a new turn of the wheel,' that from his position at the zenith of the supposed Irish cultural Renaissance Swift 'foresaw the ruin to come' (see *Explorations*, p. 337, and *Variorum Plays*, p. 942). This anticipated and abhorred overthrow of aristocratic breeding and intellectual rigour by the materialism, positivism, and mechanism of that 'filthy modern tide' is a central theme in Yeats's strange play about Swift, *The Words upon the Window-pane*, as well as one of the two interrelated thematic centres of 'Under Ben Bulbin', Yeats's valedictory poem which he concluded by quoting his own epitaph.⁴ In the terms of that famous testamentary poem, alternating cycles of history with peaks and troughs of cultural achievement constitute one of man's so-called 'two eternities', the eternity of his race.

Yeats's near-adulation of that half-historical, half-legendary Swift who haunted his imagination in those years when he was approaching death is epitomized in his overwrought enthusiasm for the words which Swift authored for his own tomb in St Patrick's cathedral, words which Yeats more than once called 'the greatest epitaph in history'.⁵ When he lived in Merrion Square during the middle 1920s, Yeats used to go to St Patrick's to meditate. Since that period immediately preceded his renewed interest in Swift and coincided with the writing of some poems obsessively concerned with old age and the approach of death, it is not inconceivable that the meditations in the presence of that tomb's

inscription contain the earliest seeds of Yeats's ultimate decision to follow Swift's lead in composing his own epitaph and specifying his own place of burial. Eventually, in any case, Yeats came to feel that 'Swift's *Epitaph* and Berkeley's *Commonplace Book* [were] the greatest works of modern Ireland.'⁶ The sentiment of Swift's inscription so impressed him that he was moved to render the Latin prose into English verse and include the translation among his *Collected Poems*.⁷

The original Latin version of Swift's epitaph is as follows:

Hic depositum est Corpus
 IONATHAN SWIFT S. T. D.
 Hujus Ecclesiae Cathedralis
 Decani,
Ubi saeva Indignatio
Ulterius
Cor lacerare nequit.
Abi Viator
Et imitare, si poteris,
Strenuum pro virili
Libertatis Vindicatorem.
 Obiit 19 Die Mensis Octobris
 A.D. 1745. Anno AEtatis 78.⁸

A reasonably accurate, if not eloquent, prose translation of these lines would be the following:

Here is laid the body of Jonathan Swift, S. T. D. [Doctor of Sacred Theology], Dean of this Cathedral, where savage indignation can no longer lacerate his heart. Go, traveler, and imitate if you can this vigorous defender of human liberty. He died on the 19th day of the month of October, in the year of our Lord 1745 and in the 78th year of his own life.⁹

Yeats's poetic rendition of the key portions, done in the same period as as *The Words upon the Window-pane*, reads thus:

Swift has sailed into his rest;
 Savage indignation there
 Cannot lacerate his breast.
 Imitate him if you dare,
 World-besotted traveller; he
 Served human liberty. (*Variorum Poems*, p. 493)

Obviously, any satisfactory examination of influence upon Yeats's epitaph from Swift's must be considered in light of this verse translation done by Yeats himself.

The relevance of the relationship between Yeats's own epitaph and his verse rendition of Swift's is pointed up by a comment and a question of Donald Torchiana's: 'Of course there is poetic license here – where did the "World-besotted traveller" come from?' (*Yeats and Georgian Ireland*, p. 141). Whereas Torchiana is clearly right about

poetic license, his question is directed at the wrong phrase. The real modifications in Yeats's translation involve the sailing image and the concept of rest, the first of which is non-existent in Swift's Latin and the second of which is no more than implied there. The traveller, on the other hand, is in the original — *viator* — and reappears in Yeats's own epitaph in the horseman image, constituting one of the most directly observable links between the two tombstone inscriptions. *World-besotted* is not really alien to Swift's intention either and most especially not to Yeats's conception of it; for, as Yeats says in his poem 'Blood and the Moon', 'the heart in his [Swift's] blood-sodden breast had dragged him down into mankind' (*Variorum Poems*, p. 481). Swift, having served his earthly time, his lacerated breast blood-sodden and his mind muddled or 'world-besotted' from conflict and contention with society in defence of his ideas and integrity, had at last won his freedom. This heroic transcendent status gave him the right to say to other earthly pilgrims left behind as that bloodless part of him — his immortal soul — departed for another realm, 'Go' and do likewise 'if you can' or 'if you dare'.

The treatment of Yeats's epitaph by Hugh Kenner is actually tangential to another issue with which Kenner is concerned. He turns briefly to the epitaph only to illustrate his major point: that Yeats and his work represented a reaction to and departure from several inter-related eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century traditions. One of these traditions, Kenner says, was 'the formula of . . . decline':

For the natural man the moment of lowest vitality is the moment of death; in the mid-eighteenth century the image of an untroubled decline into the grave fastened itself upon the imagination of England, and '*Siste viator*' was carved on a thousand tombstones. 'Pause, traveller, whoever thou art, and consider thy mortality; as I am, so wilt thou one day be.' The traveler came on foot, examined the inscription, and went on his way pondering, his vitality still lower than before . . . Yeats turns powerfully against [this tradition] . . . in the epitaph he designed for himself . . . The *mise en scène* [of the epitaph] is rural and eighteenth century — the churchyard, the ancestral rector, the local stonecutters; but the epitaph flies in the face of traditional invocations to passers-by . . . He [the epitaph's horseman] is . . . the heroic counterimage of the footweary wanderer who was invited to ponder a '*siste viator*'.¹⁰

Kenner attaches to '*siste viator*' a footnote which says, 'Though Swift wrote, *Abi Viator* . . . ' (p. 21). I have quoted Kenner's comments at such length because they point to what is a tremendously important aspect of the interrelationships between the two Anglo-Irish authors' epitaphs: the matter of simultaneous use of and modification of tradition or convention. Kenner goes on to say, ' . . . the sentiments [in Yeats's work are] scrupulous inversions of received romantic sentiment; . . . as he always did when he touched a tradition [Yeats] subverted the usual implications' ('Sacred Book of the Arts', p. 21). Exactly! But

because Kenner is focusing his attention upon a somewhat general tradition and uses the epitaph simply to illustrate his points about it, he overlooks the fact that when studied for its own sake and in its own right Yeats's inscription is found to be a virtual exemplar of simultaneous adoption and adaptation of a more specific set of conventions, the conventions of writing epitaphs.

The first part of an article by Maurice Johnson on Swift's inscription is a concise study of the conventions of writing epitaphs. It indicates that in the eighteenth century the writing of such pieces had become something of a game or hobby with set rules and formal guidelines.¹¹ Like other eighteenth-century writers, Jonathan Swift was experienced and practiced in this mode of composition. In short, what Johnson does is to show that Swift's epitaph was highly conventional in eighteenth-century terms in virtually every respect but one — its use of the phrase *saeva indignatio* and the idea or sentiments which that phrase expresses, or has been taken to express ('The Greatest Epitaph', pp. 819-24). What 'seems so striking in the epitaph', Johnson says, is 'the mood of savage indignation which Swift ascribes to himself' (p. 820).

That was indeed just exactly what seemed so striking to Yeats. Once in his poems and once in his dramas, he singled out the Latin phrase itself for attention and emphasis. Not surprisingly, the instance from the plays occurs in *The Words upon the Window-pane*:

. . . [Swift] foresaw the ruin to come, Democracy, Rousseau, the French Revolution; that is why he hated the common run of men, . . . that is why he wrote *Gulliver*, that is why he sleeps under the greatest epitaph in history. You remember how it goes? It is almost finer in English than in Latin: 'He has gone where fierce indignation can lacerate his heart no more.' (*Variorum Plays*, p. 942).

Thus Yeats — who evidently knew more about the conventions of writing epitaphs than at first seems to be the case — responded positively and enthusiastically to his predecessor's departure from tradition in the very midst of otherwise thoroughly traditional elements in his inscription. Yeats then dared to imitate his idol by departing, in turn, from those same traditions and conventions at another level.

Judging from Kenner's discussion and footnote, one might conclude that Swift's chief modification of the tradition in terms of which he was working was the use of *abi viator* (go, traveller) rather than *siste viator* (pause, traveller). Such is not the case, however; for, as Maurice Johnson indicates, *abi viator* was also conventional:

Although eighteenth-century epitaphs in England were usually set up in a church or cemetery, away from the road, they imitated the Roman custom of calling for attention, with 'Stay, passenger!', 'Halt, mortal, halt as you pass by', 'Pilgrim! pause at this sad and silent tomb', 'Dear reader! stop and drop a

tear', or 'Stop, traveller!/And learn from me/How vain the hopes, how transient the joys of men.' Swift's *Abi, viator* was [also] frequently employed, sometimes as *Abi, viator, fac simile*. ('The Greatest Epitaph', p. 823).

Interestingly, one of the typical examples given here ends with the same two words which conclude Yeats's own epitaph, 'pass by'. Very likely Yeats knew the conventional Latin phrases and their usual English equivalents well enough to realize that his final words were, on one level, thoroughly traditional. It is also probable that the first line of the original quatrain from which Yeats's epitaph derives, 'Draw rein, draw breath', was intended as a poetic transliteration of 'pause, traveler'.¹² However, Yeats may have decided ultimately that he did not want to sound too conventional, for in 'Under Ben Bulbin' his epitaph is introduced by the expression 'no conventional phrase' (*Variorum Poems*, p. 640). Such a desire to avoid sounding overly conventional may have been one contributory factor in Yeats's eventual decision to drop the quatrain's opening line. Be that as it may, with 'go, traveler' Swift follows a tradition, and on the surface of things Yeats does not appear to deviate from his lead in this respect ('Horseman, pass by!'). It is in another important aspect of epitaph conventions that, to quote Kenner again, Yeats 'as he alwayd did when he touched a tradition subverted the usual implications'.¹³

Yeats's most obvious conscious break with the traditions and conventions of epitaph writing involves the question to whom his inscription is addressed. In keeping with the practices of both classical and eighteenth-century epitaphists, Swift had addressed himself to the ordinary passer-by. Almost certainly, Yeats did not intend his words for such an audience. This matter is one of the most variously viewed issues concerning Yeats's epitaph in the handful of commentaries that exist. Curtis Bradford is probably the most completely wrong on this point, quite plainly assuming that Yeats was perpetuating the tradition rather than intentionally altering it: '[Yeats] pictures a horseman . . . riding past his grave which lies under Ben Bulbin, stopping, and pausing to read his epitaph . . . The poet addresses him from the grave . . . Then the horseman is to pass by and get on with his own journey through the world of time.'¹⁴ Others come much closer to what must be a valid assessment than Bradford's suggestion. Kenner is better because he sees the significant difference between the melancholy eighteenth-century wayfarer and the more spiritually courageous kind of person that Yeats would be interested in communicating with, but he still has in mind an audience of passers-by: '. . . that horseman . . . is simply the . . . reader of the inscription' . . . ('Sacred Book of the Arts', p. 21). Jon Stallworthy and Edward Callan take another step forward by rejecting the passer-by tradition. Callan in particular recognizes and makes explicit Yeats's departure from tradition despite his model: 'Yeats's

epitaph counters even his beloved Swift's conventional *abi viator* — go traveller; for it is not addressed to weary pilgrims in this life . . .¹⁵ On this issue of the addressee of the epitaph's imperative, Virginian Moore and Thomas Whitaker share an insight and an error. The shared perception is that Yeats is speaking to himself, and perhaps to others like himself. The almost certain error is their suggestion that he may also be speaking to all mankind.¹⁶

If in his epitaph Yeats is addressing primarily himself, now deceased, where does the imperative imply that the symbolic horseman is to go after he passes by? The most tenable answer to this question becomes apparent upon consideration of an aspect of conventional eighteenth-century lapidary inscriptions which Johnson's article does not mention: the 'stop, traveler' phrase which was often part of the engraving suggests not only literal address to persons walking or riding past the grave but also metaphoric implications of pausing to reflect as one travels through life — life as sojourn, life as pilgrimage.¹⁷ Thus, while in at least one way Yeats was playing his words off against a convention, in another way he was simultaneously making use of one portion of that same tradition, life as sojourn, life as pilgrimage. But for Yeats — as for Swift — who believed in immortality of the soul, the grave was not the end of life's journey. The *body* is stopped and rests there, but the deathless spirit passes by to continued existence in a realm of transcendent being. This conviction probably constitutes another reason for Yeats's dropping the initial line, 'Draw rein, draw breath', from his original quatrain: he wished no suggestion of even so much as a pause in the progress of that spiritual journey.

The usual Yeatsian mode, however, is to do or say several poetic things at once. It is possible, therefore, that a specific conventional phrase other than 'siste viator', one by no means unrelated to Swift in Yeats's thought, was also being eschewed: 'rest in peace'. Yeats believed not only that the soul survives the body after death, but also that in many cases the spirit must necessarily undergo a prolonged period of anguished reliving of passionate or tragic episodes from its life on earth, a kind of purgatorial purification of the spirit's being. The concept of such a spiritual state, a state described at length in 'The Soul in Judgment', Book III of *A Vision*, underlies the plot of *The Words upon the Window-pane*. More than that, prior to the séance in that play where Swift's own tortured spirit or ghost interrupts, Yeats has one character say: 'Sometimes a spirit re-lives not the pain of death but some passionate or tragic moment of life . . . If I were a Catholic I would say that such spirits were in Purgatory. In vain do we write *requiescat in pace* upon the tomb, for they must suffer . . .' (*Variorum Plays*, p. 994). But Yeats renders the Dean's epitaph, 'Swift has sailed into his rest'. Why the discrepancy? Because in translating Swift's Latin,

Yeats was constrained by its author's language and the views on life after death expressed in it. It is obvious from Swift's epitaph that he looked upon the grave as a doorway to solace and rest, that he viewed death with a warm eye. Thus Yeats in his own epitaph is playing off his words and thoughts not only against certain aspects of lapidary convention represented in Swift's inscription, but also against certain views on the nature of death and afterlife couched in that model as well. For, Yeats instructs himself to cast a *cold* eye on both life *and* death. The introductory lines to Yeats's epitaph in 'Under Ben Bulbin', then, may well be meant to reject two particular conventional phrases at once: 'siste viator' and 'rest in peace'.

Imitate him if you dare. Following Swift in some ways, intentionally departing from him in others, Yeats's daring went beyond mere imitation. But in following where he did, he found that he must deviate from still another tradition, one closer to home and more familial. For, as his sister said when he told her of his burial plans, 'This is a break with tradition. There has not been a tombstone in the Yeats family since the eighteenth century' (*Letters of W.B. Yeats*, p. 915). Once recognized, this fact no doubt simply reaffirmed Yeats's intention more certainly than ever. Family custom or no, the poet W.B. Yeats must have his gravestone and its epitaph in order to establish unequivocally his spiritual association with the greatest writer from 'that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion', that writer whom he dared to emulate in so many ways, to differ from in so many others (quotation from *Explorations*, p. 345). But he also needed the epitaph with equal urgency to relate himself to the *future* of his country, the resurgence of culture and national identity that in the cycles of history must necessarily follow the 'ruin to come' which Swift had foreseen and which Yeats felt himself to be in the midst of, as both 'Under Ben Bulben' and the introductory essay to *The Words upon the Window-pane* make so apparent:

Swift haunts me; he is always just round the next corner . . . Sometimes it is Saint Patrick's, where I have gone to wander and meditate, that brings him to mind, sometimes I remember something hard or harsh in O'Leary or in Taylor, or in the public speech of our statesmen, that reminds me by its style of his verse or prose. Did he not speak, perhaps, with just such an intonation? This instinct for what is near and yet hidden is in reality a return to the sources of our power, and therefore a claim made upon the future. Thought seems more true, emotion more deep, spoken by someone who touches my pride, who seems to claim me of his kindred, who seems to make me a part of some national mythology, nor is mythology mere ostentation, mere vanity if it draws me onward to the unknown; another turn of the gyre and myth is wisdom, pride, discipline. I remember the shudder in my spine when [I heard the line], 'I too am of that ancient race'. (*Explorations*, pp. 345-46)

At this point in his essay, Yeats then quotes his own translation of Swift's epitaph:

Swift has sailed into his rest:
Savage indignation there
Cannot lacerate his breast.
Imitate him if you dare,
World-besotted traveller; he
Served human liberty.

By identification with Swift both through emulation and through subtle allusions in his epitaph, Yeats in his final self-dramatization and ultimate grand gesture made himself — even in death, even *through* death — part of a vaster myth and a larger reality, the eternity of his race.

FOOTNOTES

1. *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 640.
2. Jon Stallworthy, *Vision and Revision in Yeats's LAST POEMS* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 149.
3. *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach and Catherine C. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 958. The play is *The Words upon the Window-pane*. The introduction to it also appears in Yeats's *Explorations* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), with the quoted sentence on p. 345.
4. For such an interpretation of *The Words upon the Window-pane*, see Donald Torchiana, *W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 132-40. The interpretation is supported by a close reading of the play itself alongside Yeats's own discursive but unequivocally pointed introduction to it.
5. In *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 776, and in *Variorum Plays*, p. 942.
6. *W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence, 1901-1937*, ed. Ursula Bridge (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 141.
7. However, Yeats was probably not so much impressed with the verbal *style* of Swift's epitaph, whose Latin seems somewhat rough, as various scholars have remarked. See, for example, the comments on this point in J.V. Luce, 'A Note on the Composition of Swift's Epitaph', *Hermathena*, 104 (Spring 1967), 78-79.
8. See Luce, 'Composition of Swift's Epitaph', p. 78, with a photographic reproduction of the engraved stone itself on the facing page. Luce comments on 'how many . . . biographers and editors have not succeeded in reproducing it [the epitaph] with complete fidelity' (p. 78). An index of the extent to which the whole subject of Yeats's epitaph has been neglected is the fact that only one book about him quotes in full this earlier epitaph by which he was so much influenced: A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 350.
9. I am indebted to Professor Frank G. Nelson for some assistance with this translation.
10. 'The Sacred Book of the Arts' in *Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Unterecker (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 20-21.
11. Maurice Johnson, 'Swift and "The Greatest Epitaph in History"', *PMLA*, 68 (Sept. 1953), 814-15.
12. On the existence of the full quatrain in early drafts of 'Under Ben Bulbin', see Stallworthy, *Vision and Revision*, pp. 149 and 158. The quatrain also occurs in two letters by Yeats; see *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 184, and William Rose, 'A Letter from W.B. Yeats on Rilke', *German Life and Letters*, n. s. 15 (Oct. 1961), 69-70.

13. Actually, I do not agree with Kenner that Yeats *always* 'subverted' the traditions that he touched. It is certainly true, however, that he frequently adapted or modified them to suit his own purposes or to achieve syntheses with materials from other sources or traditions.
14. 'Journeys to Byzantium', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 25 (Spring 1949), 214.
15. 'W.B. Yeats on the Coming of Age: From "Homo Sapiens" to "L'homme clairvoyant"', *Dublin Magazine*, 9 (Summer 1972), 44.
16. See respectively *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats' Search for Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 447, and *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1964), p. 268.
17. This point was made in a letter, dated August 6, 1974, written to me by Professor J. Paul Hunter in response to inquiries about the conventions of eighteenth-century epitaphs. Although Johnson does not treat this part of the tradition, it is clearly implied in the quoted passages from both Bradford and Callan.